

The Author of the *Precious Garland*— Nagarjuna

Nagarjuna is widely considered to be one of the most important Buddhist philosophers and is often referred to as the “Second Buddha”.

There are many different Indian, Tibetan, and Chinese biographies of his life. Nagarjuna was born at a time when the teachings of the Universal Vehicle (with a few exceptions) were no longer available in the human realm, and he is perhaps best known for reintroducing these teachings.

When the Buddha turned the wheel of dharma, he gave teachings on the Universal Vehicle to selected disciples, many of whom were celestial realm bodhisattvas who resided in pure lands. His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama has said on several occasions, referring to Avalokiteshvara's extensive answer to Shariputra's question in the *Heart Sutra*, that Avalokiteshvara was a celestial being and thus invisible to ordinary humans. Therefore, to ordinary humans who were present when the *Heart Sutra* was taught, it might have seemed that Shariputra was talking to himself.

Shortly after the passing of the Buddha, the first council was held in a cave near Rajagriha (now Rajgir), where about 500 arhats gathered to collect the Buddha's teachings. It was presided over by Mahakashyapa, one of the Buddha's senior disciples, with the support of King Ajatashatru. Its main purpose was to preserve the Buddha's sutras and the monastic discipline or rules (Vinaya). The sutras were recited by Ananda, the Vinaya by Upali, and according to some accounts, the Abhidharma by Mahakashyapa. These teachings mainly belonged to the Fundamental Vehicle.

The most important teachings of the Universal Vehicle were the different *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, which were traditionally said to have disappeared from the human realm forty years after the Buddha's death and then returned 400 years later by Nagarjuna.

Nagarjuna was born into a Brahmin family (according to many sutras, about 400 years after the Buddha's death) in Vidarbha, a kingdom in present-day Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh in southern India. His birth and his important contribution to the buddha-dharma were predicted by the Buddha in the *Descent into Lanka*

Sutra (Skt. *laṅkāvatārasūtra*, Tib. *lan kar gshegs pa'i mdo*), the *Great Cloud Sutra* (Skt. *mahāmeghasūtra*, Tib. *sprin chen po'i mdo*), the *Great Drum Sutra* (Skt. *mahābherihāraka parivartasūtra*, Tib. *rnga bo che chen po'i mdo*), and others. When he was born, a fortune-teller predicted that Nagarjuna would live only seven days, but if his parents made offerings to one hundred monks, he could live to be seven years old. Fearing for his life, his parents sent Nagarjuna at the age of seven to the monastic university of Nalanda in northern India. There, the Buddhist master Saraha told him that if he became a monk and recited the Amitayus mantra, he would live a long life. Nagarjuna did as told and entered the monastery, receiving the name "Shrimanta".

At Nalanda, Nagarjuna studied sutra and tantra with Ratnamati and then with Saraha, especially the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* (Tib. *dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i rgyud*). He also learned alchemy from a Brahmin and gained the ability to transform iron into gold. With this ability he was able to feed the Nalanda monks during a famine.

Eventually Nagarjuna became the abbot of Nalanda. He expelled eight thousand monks who did not properly observe the Vinaya monastic rules of discipline. He also defeated five hundred non-Buddhists in debate.

Two youths who were emanations of the sons of a naga king came to Nalanda. They had the natural fragrance of sandalwood. Nagarjuna asked how this could be, and they confessed who they were. Nagarjuna then asked for sandalwood incense for a statue of Tara and for the nagas' help in building temples. They returned to the naga kingdom and asked their father, who said he could only help if Nagarjuna came to their kingdom to teach them. Nagarjuna went, made many offerings, and taught the nagas.

Nagarjuna knew that when the Buddha had taught the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, the nagas had taken a version of the *Hundred Thousand Verse Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* (Skt. *satasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, Tib. *shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa stong pa brgya pa*) back to their kingdom for safekeeping and he requested a copy. They gave him a copy but to ensure that Nagarjuna would return and continue to teach them, the nagas kept the last two chapters of the hundred thousand verse version.

Later, the last two chapters were filled in with the last two chapters of the *Eight Thousand Verse Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* (Skt. *aṣṭasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, Tib. *shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa brgyad stong pa*). This is why the last two chapters of the two texts are the same. Nagarjuna also brought back naga clay and built many temples and stupas with it.

Once when Nagarjuna was teaching the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, six nagas came and formed an umbrella over his head to protect him from the sun. This is why the iconographic representation of Nagarjuna has the six nagas over his head. From this event he got the name “Naga”. And from the fact that his skill in teaching dharma was straight to the point, like the arrows of the famous archer Arjuna (the name of the hero in the Hindu classic, the *Bhagavad Gita*), he was given the name Arjuna. Thus he became known as “Nagarjuna”.

Nagarjuna later traveled to the Northern Island (or Northern Continent) to teach. On the way, he met some children playing in the street. He prophesied that one of them, named Jetaka, would become a king. When Nagarjuna returned from the Northern Island, the boy had indeed grown up to become the king of a large kingdom in southern India. Nagarjuna stayed with him for three years, teaching him, and then spent his last years elsewhere in his kingdom, on Shri Parvata, the holy mountain overlooking present-day Nagarjunakonda.

According to some accounts, Nagarjuna wrote the *Precious Garland* for this king. He is also said to be the king to whom Nagarjuna wrote *A Letter to a Friend* (Skt. *suhṛllekha*, Tib. *bshes pa'i spring yig*), namely King Surabhibhadra (Tib. *bde spyod bzang po*), who is also known by other names.

Please note that Nagarjuna is referred to as the pioneer or trailblazer (Tib. *shing rta'i srol 'byed*) of the Universal Vehicle, since he reintroduced the teachings of this vehicle and provided the reasonings for why the Buddha taught it. He is also considered the pioneer of the explicit subject matter of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, which is emptiness, and the pioneer of the Madhyamika philosophy.

Although the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* are no more precious than the other teachings of the Buddha, they are extremely important because they explicitly teach the numerous different reasonings that establish the ultimate nature of phenomena or emptiness, which must be realized not only by Bodhisattvas who seek to attain

the state of a buddha but also by practitioners of the Fundamental Vehicle who seek to attain self-liberation.

Implicitly, the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* teach the grounds and paths, that is, the different levels of mental transformation that practitioners of the Universal Vehicle must undergo in order to realize their full potential and attain the awakened state of a buddha.

Therefore, since they teach these two extremely important subject matters the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* are held to be among the most outstanding teachings of the Buddha.

Based on the profound and extensive subject matter of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, the Buddha introduced two experiential lineages that were initially transmitted separately: (1) the lineage of the profound view (Tib. *zab mo lta brgyud*) and (2) the lineage of the extensive conduct (Tib. *rgya chen spyod brgyud*).

The Buddha had many great bodhisattva disciples, and the principal ones were referred to as his “eight great intimate/close sons” (Skt. *aṣṭa mahā upaputra*, Tib. *nye ba'i sras chen brgyad*). They were Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, Vajrapani, Kṣhitigarbha, Nirvaranavishkambi, Akashagarbha, Maitreya, and Samantabhadra.

Buddha Shakyamuni entrusted the lineage of the profound view to the Bodhisattva Manjushri and the lineage of the extensive conduct to the Bodhisattva Maitreya, both of whom were celestial beings. About four hundred years later, the Bodhisattva Manjushri transmitted the lineage of the profound view to Nagarjuna, and about nine hundred years later, the Bodhisattva Maitreya transmitted the lineage of the extensive conduct to Asanga.

Nagarjuna is thus known as the pioneer of the explicit subject matter of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, which is emptiness, and Asanga is known as the pioneer of the implicit subject matter of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, which refers to the stages of the paths to enlightenment. Nagarjuna and Asanga were the first humans after the Buddha to receive the two lineages and to pass them on to other masters of the human realm, so that the two experiential lineages are still available to us today.

Furthermore, Nagarjuna is perhaps most noted as the pioneer of the Madhyamika philosophy, because he was the first human being to elucidate the Madhyamika philosophy by distinguishing which of the Buddha's teachings are to be interpreted and which are definitive.

In summary, there are three main reasons why Nagarjuna is so important:

1. He is the pioneer of the Universal Vehicle because he reintroduced the teachings of the Universal Vehicle: he returned its most important teachings, the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, to the human realm and he established that these sutras, and thus the Universal Vehicle, had been taught by the Buddha.
2. He is the pioneer of the explicit subject matter of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, because he was the first human being to receive the lineage of the profound view from the Bodhisattva Manjushri, and to specify that emptiness is the explicit subject matter of these sutras, and to give detailed explanations of the meaning of emptiness.
3. Most notably, he is the pioneer of the Madhyamika school, because he was the first human being to clearly expound the Madhyamika philosophy by distinguishing, mainly on the basis of the *Teaching of Akshayamati Sutra* (Skt. *akṣayamatīnirdeśa sūtra*, Tib. *blo gros mi zad pas bstan pa'i mdo*), which of the Buddha's teachings were to be interpreted and which were definitive.¹

¹ Please note that there is no pioneer of the Fundamental Vehicle, because there was never a time when this vehicle disappeared from the human realm. There is a pioneer of the implicit subject matter of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* though, as well as a pioneer of one of the other four Buddhist tenet systems, the Chittamatra school.

Asanga, as mentioned above, is the pioneer of the implicit subject matter of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, because he was the first human being to receive the lineage of the extensive conduct from the Bodhisattva Maitreya, and to specify that the grounds and paths leading to buddhahood are the implicit subject matter of these sutras, and to give detailed explanations on these grounds and paths.

Likewise, Asanga is the pioneer of the Chittamatra school, because he was the first human being to expound the Chittamatra philosophy, by distinguishing, on the basis of the *Sutra Unravelling the Thought* (Skt. *saṃdhi nirmocana sūtra*, Tib. *mdo sde dgongs 'grel*), which of the Buddha's teachings need to be interpreted and which are definitive.

However, there is no pioneer of the other two tenet systems, the Vaibashika and Sautrantika schools, because they never disappeared from the human realm, and because these schools have no tradition of distinguishing between the interpretable and definitive teachings of the Buddha; all the teachings that the followers of each of the two schools accept as originating from the Buddha are taken literally.

Nagarjuna was a prolific writer, composing numerous treatises on sutra, tantra, and other topics such as medicine, which are listed below. The sutric texts, on the basis of which Nagarjuna is considered to be (1) the pioneer of the Universal Vehicle, (2) the pioneer of the explicit subject matter of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, and (3) the pioneer of the Madhyamika school, are his *Five or Six Collections of Reasoning* and his *Compendium of Sutra* (Skt. *sūtrasamuccaya*, Tib. *mdo kun las btus pa*). The *Six Collections of Reasoning* (of which the principal treatise is the *Fundamental Wisdom*) present the reasonings that establish that the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, and thus the Universal Vehicle, were taught by the Buddha, that emptiness is the explicit subject matter of these sutras, etc., while the *Compendium of Sutra* provides the scriptural support for these reasonings by citing numerous passages from the Universal Vehicle sutras.

Regarding Nagarjuna's level of spiritual realization, the Buddha says in the *Great Drum Sutra* that Nagarjuna was a bodhisattva who had attained the seventh ground. Chandrakirti, in his commentary on the Guhyasamaja Tantra, *Illuminating Lamp* (Skt. *pradīpodyotana nāma ṭīkā*, Tib. *sgron gsa*), says that Nagarjuna attained the enlightened state of a buddha in that very life.

Among his many other texts on sutric topics, there are his *Collections of Reasoning* (Skt. *yuktikaya*, Tib. *rigs tshogs*), *Collections of Praises* (Tib. *bstod tshogs*), and *Collections of Advice* (Tib. *gtam tshogs*).

His *Collections of Reasoning* consist of five or six texts, commonly referred to as the *Five or Six Collections of Reasoning of the Middle Way* (Tib. *dbu ma rigs tshogs Inga* or *dbu ma rigs tshogs drug*)

The six texts are:

1. *Fundamental Wisdom* (Skt. *mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Tib. *dbu ma rtsa ba shes rab*)

In 27 chapters and 449 verses, it extensively presents the middle way view of emptiness and dependent arising and serves as the foundation of the other five texts.

2. *Sutra Called "Finely Woven"* (Skt. *vaidalyasutra*, Tib. *zhib mo rnam 'thag zhes bya ba'i mdo*)

It refutes the non-buddhist view of the sixteen categories of the Nyaiyayika.

3. *Rebuttal of Objections* (Skt. *vigrahavyāvartanī*, Tib. *rtsod pa zlog pa*)

It serves as a supplement to the first chapter of the *Fundamental Wisdom* and shows that despite their lack of inherent existence, words, logical reasoning and so forth are effective in establishing reality.

4. *Seventy Verses on Emptiness* (Skt. *shūnyatāsaptati*, Tib. *stong nyid bdun bcu pa*).

It serves as a supplement to the seventh chapter of the *Fundamental Wisdom* and was composed in response to an argument against the last verse of that chapter.

5. *Sixty Verses of Reasoning* (Skt. *yuktiṣaṣṭikā*, Tib. *rigs pa drug cu pa*)

It shows that in order to achieve liberation it is necessary to understand the reality of existence and non-existence.

6. *Precious Garland* (Skt. *ratnāvalī*, Tib. *rin chen phreng ba*)

In five chapters and 500 verses, Nagarjuna explains how to attain well-being within samsara and how to attain liberation and enlightenment.

Those who claim that there are only *Five Collections of Reasoning of the Middle Way*, place the *Precious Garland* among Nagarjuna's *Collections of Advice*.

However, Lama Tsongkhapa holds that there are *Six Collections of Reasoning* and that the *Precious Garland* is included in the *Collections of Reasoning*.

Included among Nagarjuna's *Collections of Praise* are:

- *Praise to the Dharmadhatu* (Skt. *dharmadhātu stava*, Tib. *chos dbyings bstod pa*)
- *Praise to the Ultimate Truth* (Skt. *paramārtha stava*, Tib. *don dam par bstod pa*)
- *Praise to the Supramundane* (Skt. *lokātīta stava*, Tib. *'jig rten las 'das par bstod pa*)
- *Praise of the Inconceivable* (Skt. *acintyastava*, Tib. *bsam gyis mi khyab par bstod pa*)

Included among his *Collections of Advice* are:

- *Commentary on Bodhichitta* (Skt. *bodhicittavivaraṇa*, Tib. *byang chub sems kyi 'grel ba*)
- *Letter to a Friend* (Skt. *suhṛllekha*, Tib. *bshes pa'i spring yig*)

- *Tree of Wisdom* (Skt. *nītiśāstraprajñādaṇḍa*, Tib. *lugs kyi bstan bcos shes rab stong po*).
- *A Hundred Wisdoms* (Skt. *prajñāsataka*)
- *Drops for Healing Beings* (Skt. *janapōsanabindu*)
- *Compendium of Sutra* (Skt. *sūtrasamuccaya*, Tib. *mdo kun las btus pa*)

This text cites many passages from the Mahayana sutras, indicating that the Universal Vehicle was taught by the Buddha and demonstrating that Nagarjuna's explanation of emptiness is based on the Buddha's teachings.

Also attributed to Nagarjuna are several commentaries on *The Guhyasamaja Tantra*, including:

- *Abbreviated Means for Actualization* (Skt. *piṇḍīkṛta sādhana*, Tib. *sgrub thabs mdor byas*)
- *Method for Meditating on the Generation Stage of the Mahayoga Tantra Guhyasamaja Mixed with Its Textual Sources* (Skt. *srī guhyasamāja mahāyogatantra utpattikrama sādhana sūtra melāpaka*, Tib. *rnal 'byor chen po'i rgyud dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i bskyed pa'i rim pa'i bsgom pa'i thabs 'di dang bsres pa*)
- *The Five Stages* (Skt. *pañcakrama*, Tib. *rim pa lnga pa*).

Nagarjuna also composed texts on other topics such as his medical text *Yogasataka* (Tib. *sbyor ba brgya pa*).

However, these are only some of the numerous treatises Nagarjuna wrote, many of which have been translated into Tibetan. According to the table of contents of the *Collection of Tibetan Translations of Buddhist Treatises by Indian Masters* or the *Tengyur* (Tib. *bstan 'gyur*), Nagarjuna composed a total of 117 different works.

Nagarjuna's most famous disciple was Aryadeva (Tib. *'phags pa lha*), author of *Four Hundred Verses* (Skt. *catuḥśatakaśāstra*, Tib. *bzhi brgya pa*) and several commentaries on the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*.

Since Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland* is commonly considered to be part of the Madhyamika literature, it is also called the *Precious Garland of the Middle Way* (Tib. *dbu ma rin chen phreng ba*). Like the other five treatises of the *Six Collections of Reasoning*, it expounds emptiness, but what distinguishes it from the other five is

that it also explains the conventional existence of reality, the practices common to the three beings of different spiritual capacity, and, as part of the latter, the grounds and paths that lead practitioners to the state of a buddha.

The main purpose of the *Precious Garland* is to convey how we should practice the dharma in an easily comprehensible way.

There are several different Tibetan translations of the *Precious Garland*. The five main editions are the Derge, Chone, Narthang, Beijing and Zhol editions. The Derge edition, for example, has 506 verses. The (Lhasa) Zhol edition is relatively new and differs slightly from the other versions of the text found in the *Collection of Tibetan Translations of Buddhist Treatises by Indian Masters (Tengyur)*. The version we will follow here is found in Gyaltsab Je's commentary on the *Precious Garland* and has five chapters and 500 verses.

༄༅། །རྒྱལ་པོ་ལ་གདམ་བྱ་བ་རིན་པོ་ཆེའི་ཕྱེང་བ་བཞུགས་སོ། །

Precious Garland—Advice to a King

MEANING OF THE TITLE

༄༅། །རྒྱ་གར་རྒྱུད་ཀྱི་རྒྱལ་པོ་ལ་གདམ་བྱ་བ་རིན་པོ་ཆེའི་ཕྱེང་བ།

In Sanskrit: rajaparikatha ratnamala

བོད་རྒྱུད་ཀྱི་རྒྱལ་པོ་ལ་གདམ་བྱ་བ་རིན་པོ་ཆེའི་ཕྱེང་བ།

In Tibetan: rgyal po la gtam bya ba rin po che'i phreng ba

In English: Precious Garland—Advice to a King

The translators of the *Precious Garland* cite its title both in Tibetan and in Sanskrit. *Raja* (Tib. *rgyal po*) means “king” (with the Tibetan preposition *la* connoting “to”), *parikatha* (Tib. *gtam bya ba*) means “advice”, and *ratna* (Tib. *rin po che*, with the Tibetan letter ‘i connoting the genitive) means “jewel” or “precious”.

As for the Sanskrit term for “garland”, some Tibetan versions of the *Precious*

Garland cite the Sanskrit word *mala*, some *vali*, and some *mali*. Both *mala* and *vali* mean “garland”. However, the term *mali* is not correct because it means “that which has a garland”. Nowadays, when referring to the *Precious Garland* with its Sanskrit name, the most common title is *Ratnavali*.

TRANSLATOR’S HOMAGE

སངས་རྒྱལ་དང་བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་དཔའ་ཐམས་ཅད་ལ་ཕྱག་འཚལ་ལོ། །

Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

The *Precious Garland* was translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan by the Indian master Jnanagharba and the Tibetan Lotsawa Chokro Lui Gyaltsen.

Jnanagharba (Tib. *ye shes snying po*) was an 8th-century Buddhist master from Nalanda who expounded the Madhyamaka and Yogacara schools and belonged to Bhavavevika’s Svatantrika Madhyamika tradition. He was the teacher and ordination master of Shantarakshita. Tibetan sources refer to him, Shantarakshita, and Kamalashila as “*rang rgyud shar gsum*,” meaning the “three eastern Svatantrikas,” indicating their origin in eastern India. Jnanagharba is perhaps best known for his work *Distinguishing the Two Truths* (Skt. *satyadvayavibhaṅga*, Tib. *bden gnyis rnam ‘byed*).

Chokro Lui Gyaltsen (Tib. *cog ro klu’i rgyal mtshan*) was a prominent early Tibetan lotsawa or master-translator and one of the twenty-five disciples of Padmasambhava, who recognized him as an incarnate bodhisattva. He collaborated closely with the esteemed Indian masters Vimalamitra, Jnanagharba, Jinamitra, and Surendrabodhi, and played a crucial role in the continuation of the Vinaya lineage in Tibet.

Jnanagharba and Chokro Lui Gyaltsen, along with all the other lotsawas, deserve immense appreciation for their invaluable contributions to the preservation and transmission of Buddhist teachings. Through their dedicated efforts, vast bodies of Sanskrit Buddhist texts were meticulously translated into Tibetan, ensuring the continuity and accessibility of these profound teachings for future generations. Their

work not only preserved the rich heritage of Buddhist philosophy and practice but also facilitated a deep cultural and spiritual exchange. The dedication, insight, and linguistic prowess of the lotsawas have left an indelible mark on the spiritual and intellectual Buddhist landscape, making them truly deserving of our heartfelt gratitude and admiration.

The fact that Jnanagharba and Chokro Lui Gyaltsen pay homage to buddhas and bodhisattvas here indicates that this text is part of the Sutra Collection of the Buddha's words, which primarily presents the higher training in concentration or meditation. When the lotsawas pay homage to the Omniscient One at the beginning of a text they translate, it usually belongs to the Vinaya Collection and mainly explains ethical discipline—in particular, the rules and disciplines that dharma practitioners should follow. When they pay homage to the Buddha of Wisdom, Manjushri, the text belongs to the Abhidharma Collection and primarily presents wisdom.

ལེའུ་དང་པོ།

First Chapter

མངོན་མཐོ་དང་ངེས་ལེགས་བསྐྱན་པ།

Higher Rebirth and Highest Good

NAGARJUNA'S HOMAGE

1.

ཉེས་པ་ཀུན་ལས་རྣམ་གྲོལ་ཞིང་། །

ཡོན་ཏན་ཀུན་གྱིས་བརྒྱན་པ་པོ། །

སེམས་ཅན་ཀུན་གྱི་གཉེན་གཅིག་སུ། །

ཐམས་ཅད་མཁྱེན་ལ་ཕྱག་འཆལ་ལོ། །

I pay homage to the Omniscient One

Who is utterly free of all faults

And adorned with all good qualities,

The one friend of all sentient beings.

Purpose of paying homage

Nagarjuna begins his text by paying homage to the Buddha. To ensure that we do not simply skim through the first verse but instead approach it with the kind of attention that will help us to fully understand its meaning and, as a result, generate gratitude, faith, and inspiration—qualities that will make our mind most conducive to studying, reflecting and meditating on the verses that follow—it is important to understand the purpose of paying homage.

Nagarjuna's purpose for paying homage to a special object like the Buddha with a mind of devotion and reverence is for his own benefit and for the benefit of others.

Paying homage benefits Nagarjuna in the short-term because it generates merit (or positive karma) which removes obstacles to the successful composition of the text, ensuring that the writing proceeds smoothly.

It further creates a respectful and focused mindset in Nagarjuna's mental continuum that enhances the quality and depth of his words, thereby contributing to the creation of an insightful and compelling text.

By praising the Buddha, the author also seeks the blessings and guidance of the Buddha. This invocation of spiritual support provides inspiration and clarity, helping Nagarjuna to produce a meaningful and transformative text rather than a merely intellectual and academic composition.

The long-term benefit is that paying homage helps Nagarjuna to accumulate the merit to attain liberation and the fully enlightened state of a Buddha.

In terms of the benefit for others, the short-term benefit is that reading the verse of homage with the right frame of mind helps us recognize the Buddha's qualities and accomplishments, fostering humility in the mind. This humility opens our mind to new insights and reduces ego-driven barriers to learning, reflecting, and meditating on the dharma.

Further, it inspires us to approach the remaining verses with a sense of respect and reverence, a mindset that increases our receptivity to the teachings and deepens our engagement with the material.

It also evokes positive emotions such as inspiration, gratitude, and faith, which create a conducive mental environment for understanding and applying the teachings of the *Precious Garland* in our own life.

Similarly, it helps us to set a clear and positive intention for our study, reflection, and meditation on the text, reminding us of the ultimate reason for doing so: to seek the enlightenment of a Buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings.

As for the long-term benefit, engaging with the text in this manner contributes to the accumulation of the merit necessary to attain liberation and the awakened state of a buddha.

In summary, by paying homage at the beginning of this text, both author and readers benefit in multiple ways, fostering a conducive environment for insights and spiritual growth.

Nagarjuna pays homage to the Omniscient One, by praising him for three enlightened qualities: (1) his perfect eliminations, (2) his perfect realizations, and (3) his enlightened activities for the benefit of others.

The first two qualities mainly benefit the Buddha, while the third quality mainly benefits sentient beings.

Perfect eliminations

The Buddha's perfect eliminations refers to the Buddha's eradication of all mental faults and limitations. These faults and limitations are not in the nature of the mind and are usually described as mental obstructions, which are categorized into two types:

1. afflictive obstructions (or obstructions to liberation) and
2. cognitive obstructions (or obstructions to omniscience or buddhahood)

Afflictive obstructions

Afflictive obstructions can also be classified into two types:

- (a) mental afflictions and
- (b) the "seeds" of the mental afflictions

(a) **Mental afflictions** are characterized as harmful consciousnesses since they exaggerate and distort our perception of reality and disturb our peace of mind and mental clarity as soon as they arise, leading to unrest, agitation, and discontent.

They also drive us to engage in disproportionate mental, verbal, and physical karmic actions that, in turn, result in all our unwanted or limited experiences, perpetuating our entrapment in cycle of existence.

An example is the root misconception of reality, or root ignorance, which exaggerates the mode of existence of the self and other phenomena by perceiving them as inherently existent. This misconception gives rise to all the other mental afflictions, including attachment and aversion.

Attachment amplifies the positive qualities of a person, thing or situation, making it appear more appealing and desirable than it actually is. It overestimates the potential pleasure or happiness that we believe an object of attachment can bring us, fosters a strong sense of clinging and dependence on the object, and blurs the distinction between the object and its positive qualities, blinding us to its flaws and its impermanence.

Aversion fixates on the negative aspects of a person or a situation, blowing them out of proportion and making them seem far worse than they actually are. Like attachment, aversion affects us in such a way that it seems that the object of aversion and its negative aspects are one and the same, causing us to disregard or minimize any of its positive qualities.

Similarly, all the other afflictions inflate and distort reality, leading to extreme and possibly harmful actions of body, speech, and mind.

(b) The second type of afflictive obstruction consists of the **seeds of the mental afflictions**, responsible for the fact that these afflictions, although they are not constantly active in our mind, can nevertheless arise at any time.

The seeds of the afflictions, sometimes referred to as 'latent afflictions', refer to the potential for the afflictions to arise in our mental continuum. They reside in our mind, like dormant seeds in the earth, and can be activated by many different conditions, both internal and external.

External conditions include sensory stimuli, situations, environments, or interactions with others. For example, encountering a frustrating situation can activate the seed of aversion, while a pleasant sensory experience can trigger attachment.

Internal conditions include mental states, such as memories and beliefs, and feelings or emotions such as happiness, sadness, worry, and fear. A mind preoccupied with stress, for instance, may trigger aversion, while a happy mind is more likely to activate the seed of attachment.

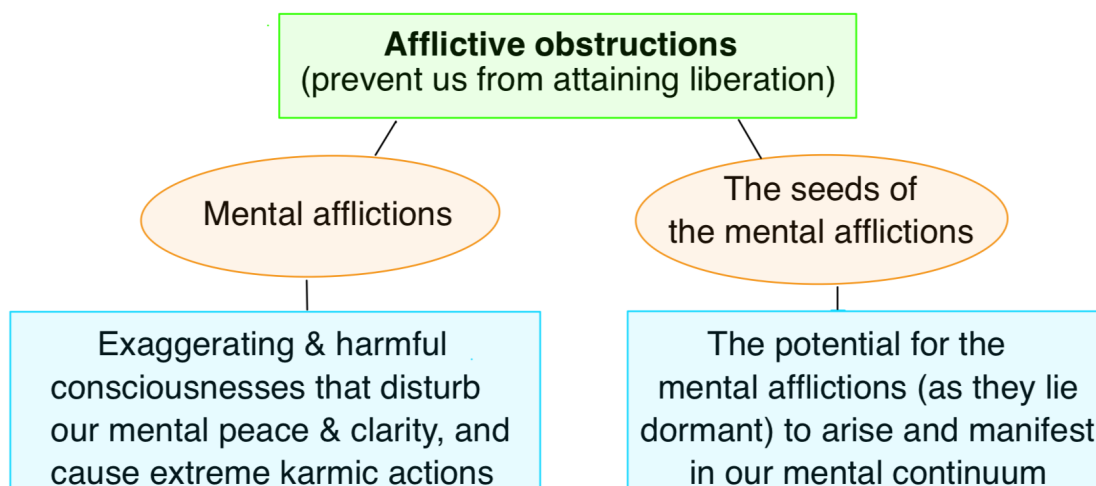
This pattern applies to all the other afflictions.

To eliminate the afflictions, it is essential to not only prevent them from arising in our mental continuum but also to eradicate them irrevocably, that is, to eliminate them along with their seeds.

It should be noted that there are special states of deep concentration that play a crucial role in preventing the manifestation of some of the coarser afflictions, such as anger. These deep concentrations are profound meditative absorptions characterized by exceptional mental focus and stillness achieved through meditation. Their intense focus stabilizes the mind to such an extent that it is not susceptible to the distractions and disturbances that trigger anger and other coarser afflictions.

However, unless these profound states of concentration are serving as the mental basis for the wisdom that directly realizes emptiness, they cannot eliminate the coarse afflictions along with their seeds; they merely suppress some of them and prevent them from manifesting. While this suppression can be deep and long-lasting, even spanning multiple lifetimes, it remains temporary. Unless these concentrations are used to cultivate the paths to liberation and enlightenment, they will eventually deteriorate, allowing previously suppressed afflictions to re-emerge.

In short, the afflictive obstructions are:



The Buddha has eliminated all the afflictions along with their seeds. As a bodhisattva, he cultivated the meditative equipoise directly realizing emptiness, which gradually and irrevocably eliminated the root misperception of reality and all other afflictions along with their seeds, so that he attained liberation on the eighth ground of the bodhisattva path of meditation. Having eliminated the afflictive obstructions, he then began to eliminate the cognitive obstructions.

Cognitive obstructions

Cognitive obstructions are the subtle traces or imprints left by the afflictions: the imprints of the root misconception of reality, of attachment, of aversion, and of all the other afflictions.

Individuals who have attained liberation (and become arhats), but who have not yet achieved enlightenment, have completely eradicated the afflictive obstructions—all the mental afflictions along with their seeds. However, the subtle imprints or propensities from the mental afflictions remain in their mind.

To illustrate this, the scriptures use the analogy of a bowl filled with garlic cloves. Even after all the garlic has been removed, the bowl retains a pungent smell. The bowl symbolizes the mind, and the garlic represents the afflictive obstructions preventing the mind from becoming liberated. Removing the garlic signifies the process of eliminating these obstructions through the meditative equipoise that directly realizes emptiness. The lingering smell represents the remaining traces or imprints of the afflictions.

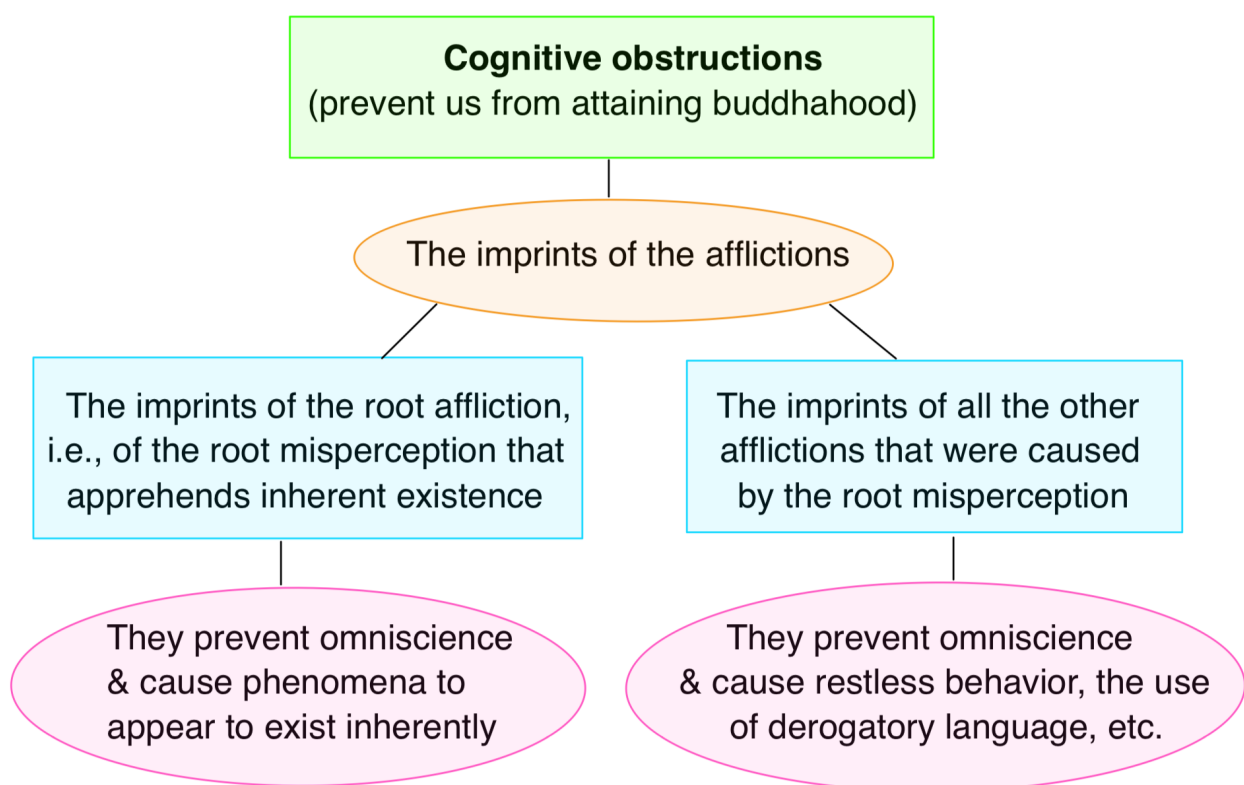
The imprints do not cause arhats to have non-virtuous thoughts or to act in any unwholesome way, but they still affect their body, speech, and mind by remaining present in the form of subtle habitual propensities.

The imprints of the root misconception that apprehends inherent existence causes all phenomena that an arhat's mind perceives to appear as existing inherently. As explained in Tsongkhapa's *Illumination of the Intent* (which is a commentary on Chandrakirti's *Entering the Middle Way*), the imprints of attachment may drive an arhat to display restless behavior, likened to a monkey jumping about. And the

imprints of aversion may cause an arhat to use derogatory language like “lowly commoner”.²

But the imprints of the afflictions not only give rise to specific subtle habitual tendencies of the body, speech, and mind, they also obstruct the mind, preventing it from perceiving the two truths—conventional truth and ultimate truth— and thus all phenomena simultaneously.

In short, the cognitive obstructions are:

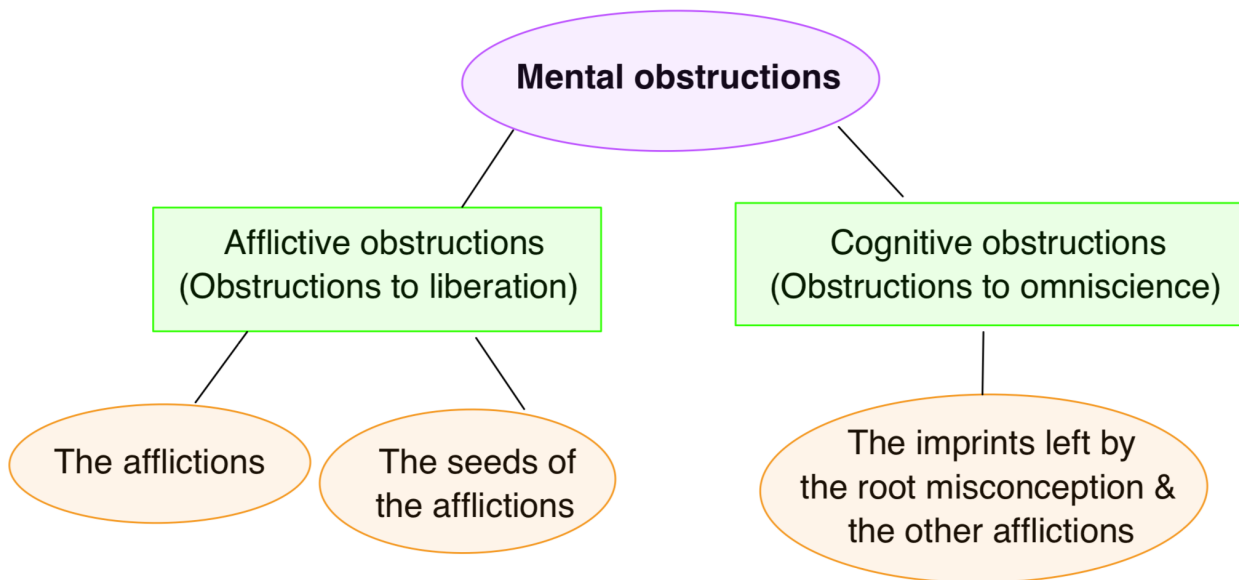


The Buddha has eliminated all the cognitive obstructions. Having eliminated the afflictive obstructions while on the eighth ground of the bodhisattva path of meditation, his meditative equipoise directly realizing emptiness then gradually and

² Lama Tsongkhapa’s *Illumination of the Intent* [translated by Geshe Thubten Jinpa, Library of Tibetan Classics, Volume 19] says: “The physical and verbal actions” here refer to such behaviors as those present even in an arhat, such as jumping about like a monkey or calling someone a “lowly commoner,” physical and verbal deportment proscribed by the Buddha that they still have not curtailed. “Also” indicates that the habitual propensities toward attachment and so on are obstacles to fully comprehending objects of knowledge as well.

irrevocably eradicated the imprints of the mental afflictions. The moment the Buddha attained the cessation of all the imprints was the first moment of his enlightenment.

In summary, the two types of obstructions are:



Perfection realizations

Having completely eradicated all obscurations, the Buddha has perfect realizations, which means the Buddha's mind is omniscient. The Buddha's mind simultaneously and effortlessly knows the infinite variety of all conventional phenomena of the past, present and future, as well as the profound and ultimate truth of these phenomena, their lack of inherent existence.

The Buddha knows everything because that which previously prevented his mind from manifesting its fundamental quality of knowing has been removed. Most importantly, this means that the Buddha knows the minds of all sentient beings. He knows their tendencies, predispositions, abilities, interests, likes and dislikes, and what karmic actions they have accumulated. In this way, the Buddha is the most effective spiritual guide, able to lead every single sentient being to the same level of realization that he has attained.

The Buddha's omniscient mind and thus his perfect realizations also include his great love and compassion, his mental powers, his fearlessness, and so on.

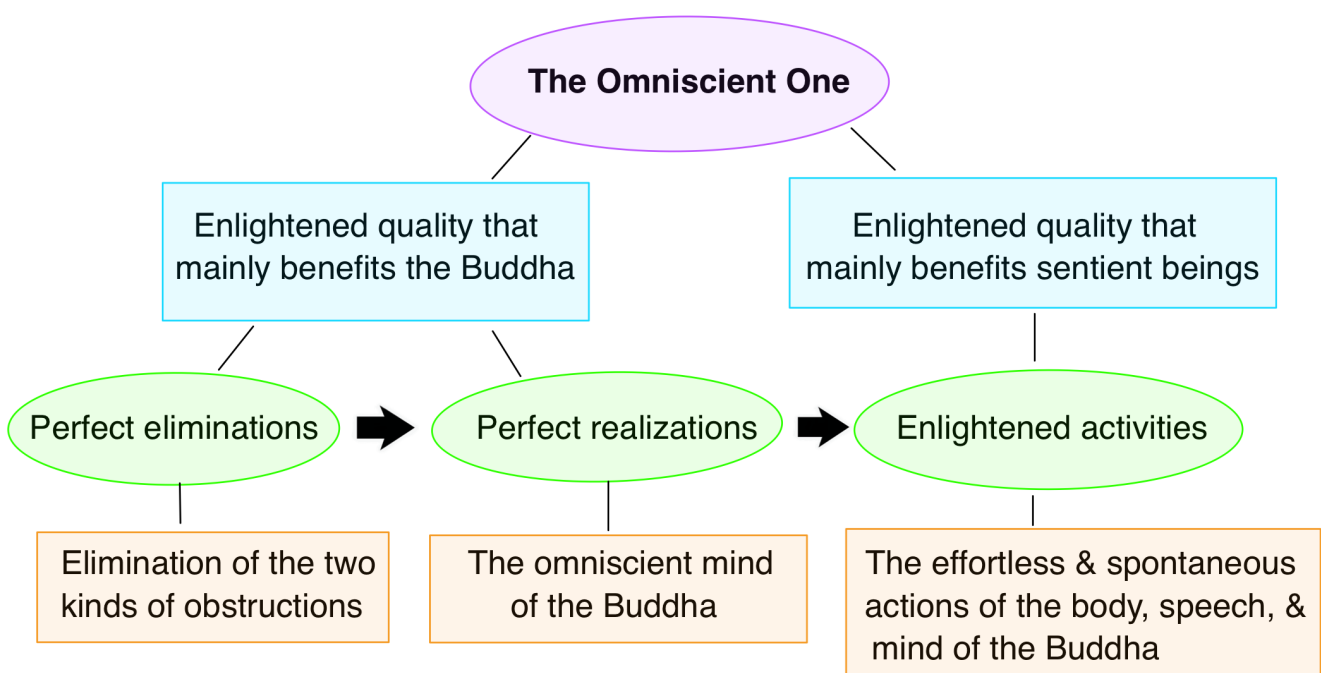
The Buddha's enlightened activities for the benefit of others

Owing to his perfect realizations and driven by his limitless, impartial, and unconditional love and compassion for all sentient beings, the Buddha only performs enlightened activities: He spontaneously and effortlessly devotes all his physical, verbal, and mental actions to the benefit of all sentient beings, manifesting different emanations, teaching them directly and indirectly by his words and his example, and thus helping them in the most effective way to attain liberation and enlightenment. This makes him the only truly effective spiritual guide or spiritual friend of sentient beings.

So, in the first verse, Nagarjuna says:

I, Nagarjuna **pay homage** or bow **to the Omniscient One**, Buddha Shakyamuni, (1) **who is utterly free of**, that is, who has attained the complete and irrevocable cessation of **all** mental **faults** and limitations, having eliminated the two kinds of obstructions; (2) **who is adorned with all good** qualities, having attained perfect realizations in the form of an enlightened mind that knows everything; and (3) who therefore engages spontaneously and effortlessly in pure enlightened activities, making him **the one** truly effective spiritual **friend of all sentient beings**.

In summary, the enlightened qualities of the Buddha that Nagarjuna praises here are:



NAGARJUNA'S PROMISE TO COMPOSE THE TEXT

2.

ཀུལ་པོ་ཁྱོད་ལ་ཆོས་བསྐྱབ་ཕྱིར། །

གཅིག་ཏུ་དག་བའི་ཆོས་བཤད་དེ། །

དམ་པའི་ཆོས་ཀྱི་སྒྲོང་ལ་ནི། །

ཆོས་འགྲུབ་འགྱུར་ཏེ་གང་ཞིག་ལ། །

**O King, I will explain to you the fully virtuous dharma
So that you may give rise to the dharma within yourself,
For the dharma will be accomplished
In one who is a vessel of the sacred dharma.**

The first two lines are the “promise to compose the text”, while the last two lines give the reason for teaching the king the verses of the *Precious Garland*, indicating that the king is a suitable vessel for the dharma and will thus attain realizations.

Promise to compose the text

Following the words of homage, Buddhist treatises typically include a promise to compose the text, which is not a mere formality. This promise acts as a powerful tool for initiating, guiding, and ensuring the successful completion of the composition. It fosters purpose and motivation for the author and establishes a connection with the reader, while emphasizing the importance of intention and commitment in creating Buddhist literature.

The promise also highlights the pivotal role a qualified author plays in the transmission of the dharma. Not only does it demonstrate his deep commitment to upholding and sharing the teachings of the Buddha, it also acknowledges the weight of the task and the importance of preserving the accuracy and integrity of the teachings being transmitted. With this promise, the author actively participates in the lineage of dharma transmission, becoming a link in the chain of great masters who have dedicated themselves to preserving and spreading the teachings, thereby upholding the Buddha’s intention to benefit all sentient beings.

Many teachers, when commenting on a Buddhist treatise, quote the following verse from Nagarjuna's *Tree of Wisdom* (Skt. *prajnadanda*, Tib. *shes rab stong po*) to elucidate the significance of the promise to compose the text found at the beginning of such a work:

“The wise do not give many promises.
But the promises they make, though difficult to keep,
Are like carvings in stone:
Unchanging, even in the face of death.”

This quote underscores the deep commitment and sincerity behind such promises, emphasizing their enduring nature and the serious dedication required for composing a Buddhist treatise.

In his commentary on the *Precious Garland*, Gyaltsab Je indicates that the lines that constitute the promise to compose the *Precious Garland* also present the *words of purpose and relationship* (Tib. *dgos 'brel gyi ngag*), although this is not immediately apparent in the wording of these lines.

Words of purpose and relationship

Indian Buddhist treatises often begin with the *words of purpose and relationship*, which outline four components of the text: (1) its subject matter, (2) its immediate purpose, (3) its ultimate purpose, and (4) how the first three components relate to each other.

This structure helps us to understand why the author composed the treatise. It helps to provide context, clarifies the text's intent and significance, and provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the teaching and the relevance of the teaching to both daily life and the ultimate goals of liberation and enlightenment.

The **subject matter** encompasses the primary topic or core teaching covered in a treatise and provides the context for the subsequent discussion.

The **immediate purpose** relates the specific aim or objective of a text within its immediate context. It clarifies why the subject matter is being presented and what

the author intends for the reader to accomplish in the short-term by studying and reflecting on the treatise.

The **ultimate purpose** points to the ultimate or long-term goal that a text is designed to achieve. It looks beyond the immediate objectives and focuses on the broader, enduring, and most important result of the teaching, the reader's attainment of liberation and enlightenment.

The **relationship** denotes the connection between the subject matter, immediate purpose, and long-term purpose, and indicates how the subject matter and immediate purpose contribute meaningfully to the ultimate purpose. The connection between the three components is such that the ultimate purpose relates to and is thus dependent on the immediate purpose, which in turn relates to and is dependent on the subject matter. This means that without the subject matter, there would be no immediate purpose, and without the immediate purpose, there would be no ultimate purpose.

As to the four components of the *Precious Garland*:

Subject matter

The *Precious Garland* explores two aspects of the dharma in its subject matter: a causal and a resultant.

The resultant aspect encompasses the two key objectives of Buddhist practice:

- a) **Higher rebirths**: These refer to rebirths in the human or celestial realms, which are considered most conducive to Buddhist practice owing to the favorable conditions they provide for spiritual development.
- b) **The highest good**: This refers to the ultimate goals of liberation and buddhahood.

The causal aspect pertains to the Buddhist practices or methods that lead to these two objectives:

- a) **The causes of higher rebirths**: These involve ethical and virtuous actions such as the ten virtues.
- b) **The causes of the highest good**: These include renunciation, the wisdom realizing emptiness, bodhicitta, and so on.

Immediate Purpose:

The immediate purpose of the *Precious Garland* is twofold:

1. For the reader to understand the meaning of higher rebirths, the highest good, and their respective causes through diligent study and reflection upon the content of the text.
2. For the reader to meditate on (i.e., practice and train in) the causes of higher rebirths as taught in the text, in order to attain such rebirths in the human or celestial realms, on the basis of which the ultimate purpose will be fulfilled.

The ultimate purpose

The ultimate purpose of the *Precious Garland* is for the reader to attain the highest good (liberation and enlightenment) by meditating on the previously understood concepts of higher rebirths, the highest good, and their respective causes, once rebirth in the human or celestial realms has been achieved as a result of having fulfilled the immediate purpose.

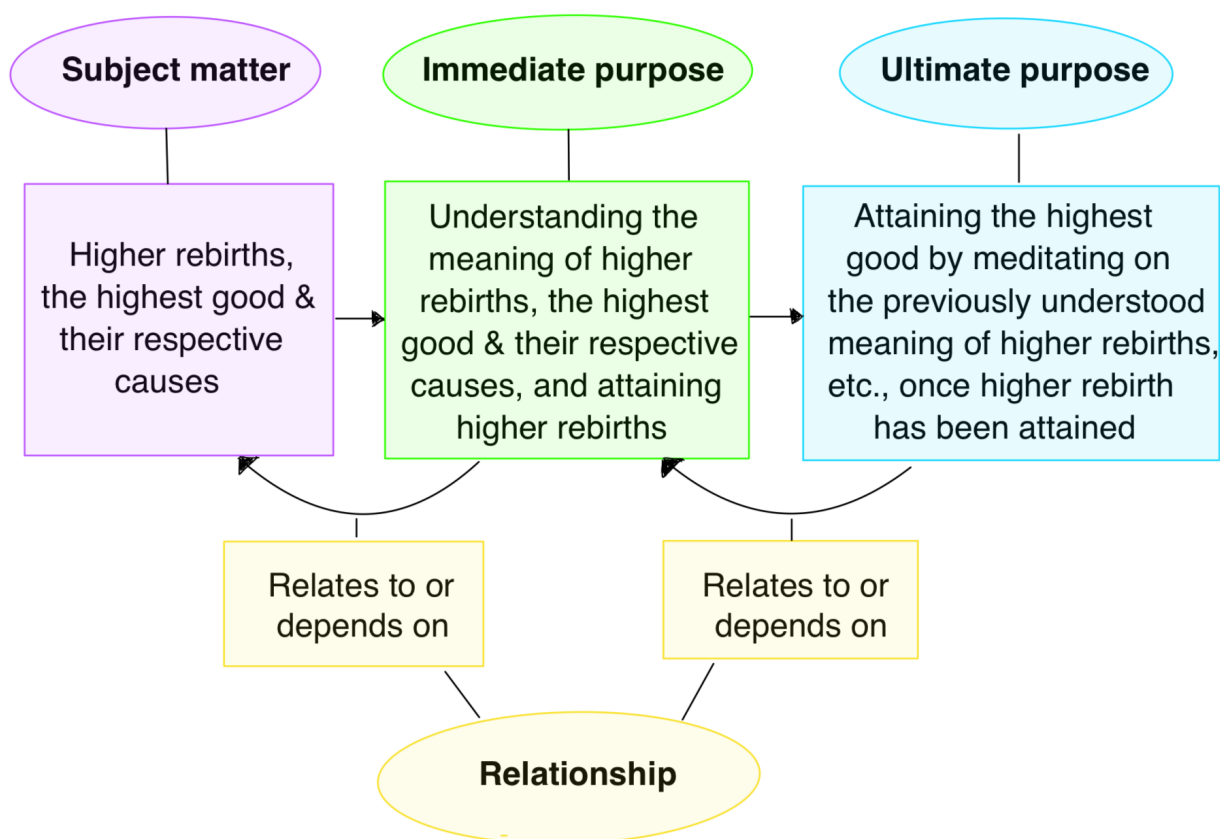
The relationship

The relationship between the first three components is that

- the **ultimate purpose** (the attainment of the highest good) relates to and depends on
- the **immediate purpose** (the understanding of the concepts of higher rebirths, the highest good, and their respective causes, as well as the attainment of higher rebirths). This understanding and attainment in turn relates to and depends on
- the **subject matter** (higher rebirths, and so on) as set forth in the *Precious Garland*.

In short, Nagarjuna expounds on these subjects because studying and reflecting on the causes or methods by which we attain higher rebirths and the highest good will give us the knowledge we need to practice and eventually attain liberation and enlightenment, which is the ultimate purpose. Attaining liberation and enlightenment is based on understanding the causes of higher rebirths and the highest good. This understanding comes from studying and reflecting on the subject matter of the *Precious Garland*.

To summarize, the four components are:



The two lines of the promise to compose the text begin with the words “**O king**,” indicating that Nagarjuna is addressing the king directly while speaking indirectly to us and other followers of the Buddha.

The fact that the *Precious Garland* was directly addressed to a king had important benefits. By directly teaching a king—who may have wielded great power and influence—and demonstrating the value of Buddhist principles for good governance, ethical behavior, and social harmony, Nagarjuna could influence not only the king’s personal actions but also the policies and practices of the entire kingdom, thus benefiting many people. His teachings are likely to have secured royal patronage for the Buddhist community, providing crucial support for the survival and flourishing of the dharma, including resources and protection for monastic institutions and practitioners.

Moreover, since the king was a layperson with considerable worldly responsibilities, Nagarjuna demonstrates that the dharma is not just for monks and nuns; it can be practiced and applied by anyone, regardless of social status or occupation.

In this way, owing to its broad-ranging relevance, practical advice, philosophical depth, versatility, and spiritual guidance, the *Precious Garland* endures as a timeless text. Its resonance transcends time and culture, offering valuable insights for personal growth, a more fulfilling life, and spiritual transformation, remaining as relevant to us today as it was nearly two millennia ago.

Nagarjuna conveys the promise to compose the text with the words: **“I will explain to you the fully virtuous dharma / So that you may give rise to the dharma within yourself”**.

The **“fully virtuous dharma”** in the first line refers to the causal aspect of the subject matter expounded in the text: (a) the causes of higher rebirth and (b) the causes of the highest good, which protect us from falling into the lower realms of existence and from being uncontrollably reborn in cyclic existence, respectively.

The causes of higher rebirth include the practice of the ten virtues. The causes of the highest good can be divided into (i) the causes of liberation and (ii) the causes of enlightenment. The causes of liberation include renunciation and the wisdom realizing emptiness, and the causes of enlightenment include the wisdom realizing emptiness that is conjoined with bodhicitta, along with the practice of the six perfections.

These causes are the dharma as they give rise to the resultant dharma: (a) higher rebirths and (b) the highest good, which are the resultant aspects of the subject matter set forth in the *Precious Garland*. This resultant dharma is what Nagarjuna is referring to in the second line of verse two when he says, **“So that you may give rise to the dharma within yourself.”**

The causes are **“fully virtuous”** because they are virtuous at every stage of practice: the beginning, middle, and end. Ethical discipline, such as the ten virtues, is the dharma that is virtuous at the beginning, as it leads to rebirth in the human and celestial realms. The wisdom realizing emptiness is the dharma that is virtuous in the middle, as it guides practitioners of both the foundational and universal vehicles towards liberation. The wisdom realizing emptiness conjoined with

bodhicitta, along with the practice of the six perfections, is the dharma that is virtuous at the end, as it leads to the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

The reason why Nagarjuna teaches the verses of the text to the king

In the last two lines of the second verse, Nagarjuna reveals his reason for imparting the verses of the Precious Garland to the king. He indicates that those who are “suitable vessels” for the dharma, and for this text in particular, will wholeheartedly engage with its teachings by studying, reflecting, and meditating upon them, which will lead to their eventual accomplishment of the dharma through the attainment of high realizations and profound insights, culminating in the supreme attainment of liberation and buddhahood. With this reference, Nagarjuna implies that the king is such a vessel.

As to the meaning of a suitable vessel of the dharma, Aryadeva says in his *Four Hundred Verses* that such a person has three qualities:

“An unprejudiced, intelligent and interested
Listener is called a vessel.
Neither the teacher’s nor the student’s
Good qualities will be taken as faults.”³

Suitable vessels for the Dharma are characterized by their (1) **unprejudiced** nature, free from attachment to their own views and aversion towards those of others. They are not opinionated and have no preconceived notions or biases, even if some of the teachings seem unconventional or challenge their existing beliefs. This means approaching the teachings with a beginner’s attitude, ready to learn and grow, and with a clear and open mind, which is essential for genuine spiritual inquiry and transformative understanding.

³ From *Aryadeva’s Four Hundred Stanzas of the Middle Way with Commentary by Gyaltsab Je* [with additional commentary by Geshe Sonam Rinchen, translated by Ruth Sonam, Snow Lion Publications, 2008]

Bhavaviveka says in his *Essence of the Middle Way* (Skt. *madhyamakahrdaya*, Tib. *dbu ma'i snying po*):

“Peace will never be found
While prejudice plagues the mind.”

Suitable vessels for the dharma are also (2) **intelligent**, possessing the discernment to distinguish between explanations that are logically sound and those that are not. This discernment stems from their critical approach to the teachings, characterized by a healthy skepticism that questions and analyzes all aspects. Such an approach is not only encouraged; it is considered essential to the study and contemplation of the dharma.

It is worth emphasizing that Buddhism highly values critical thinking based on logic and personal experience as compared to blind faith. Questioning and analyzing the dharma prevent us from blindly accepting teachings without understanding their true meaning and relevance. This promotes a deeper understanding of their subtleties, nuances, and interconnections, thus avoiding misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Critical thinking and questioning also help to overcome doubts and uncertainty, leading to a more robust and unwavering faith—based on reason and experience—in the validity of Buddhist concepts not yet fully understood. Since the dharma is meant to be actively applied to our lives, investigation and analysis motivate us to put the teachings into practice, to test their validity through personal experience and to use them to transform our mind.

With regard to the third quality, suitable vessels of the dharma are characterized by being deeply (3) **interested** in the dharma. Genuine and deep interest in the Buddha's words ignites the motivation to study, contemplate, and practice his teachings. It is the driving force for engaging with the dharma and reaping its benefits, as it stimulates curiosity and eagerness to learn, leading to a deeper understanding of the dharma's complex concepts and their practical application in daily life.

As our practice deepens, such a genuine interest in the dharma also helps us overcome the many obstacles we encounter on our spiritual journey, making us more likely to persevere through challenges, doubts, and distractions. In addition,

our interest can be contagious and inspire others to explore and potentially benefit from the teachings.

In Chandrakriti's commentary on Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Verses*, called *Extensive Commentary on the Four Hundred Verses*, he mentions two more qualities that characterize a suitable vessel for the dharma, namely (4) respect for and (5) reliance on the dharma and the qualified masters who teach it.

This type of (4) **respect** is a cornerstone of Buddhist practice. It involves attitudes such as reverence, appreciation, gratitude, and humility. Reverence entails a sense of admiration and deep esteem for the transformative power and validity of the dharma as well as for those who embody its teachings, while still allowing for personal opinion, critical thinking and discernment.

Appreciation and gratitude stem from acknowledging the profound value and significance of the dharma for personal and collective well-being, as well as the indispensable contributions of the Buddha and the lineage of masters who have preserved and transmitted these teachings.

And humility involves recognizing our own limitations in comparison to the vastness and depth of the dharma and the qualities of the minds of realized masters, while remaining grounded in the understanding that we all possess the potential to achieve these same qualities.

(5) **Reliance** on the dharma and the qualified masters who teach it is based on deep trust and faith—rooted in reasoning and personal experience—in both the teachings and the individuals who embody and transmit them.

The dharma is the ultimate refuge. It is not just a set of intellectual concepts but a collection of transformative methods. Relying on it means taking its teachings as the primary guide for transforming our mind and applying its methods to every situation in our lives to overcome harmful emotions and develop or increase beneficial ones.

Authentic masters serve as living examples of the teachings, embodying the dharma in their actions of body, speech, and mind, and acting as a vital link to the Buddha's original teachings. Relying on an authentic master goes beyond simply seeking guidance or teachings. It involves an honest and discerning relationship that fosters spiritual growth and transformation. This relationship is based on a

deep-seated conviction in the master's realization of the dharma and trust that they are genuinely committed to our spiritual development.

Reliance on a qualified master is expressed through offering service, material support, and, most importantly, diligently practicing the Dharma as the master instructs. This entails actively listening to his or her instructions, contemplating their meaning, and integrating them into our practice to develop the same qualities and virtues exemplified by the master.

In essence, reliance on the Dharma and on authentic masters is not about blind faith or passive acceptance. It is a dynamic relationship that fosters critical thinking, personal experience, and spiritual growth.

Recognizing these five qualities in the king and thus regarding him a suitable vessel for the dharma, Nagarjuna understands that imparting the remaining verses will yield immense benefit.

So, in the second verse, Nagarjuna says:

O King, you who are the main disciple of the *Precious Garland*, **I**, Nagarjuna, **will explain to you the fully virtuous dharma**, which refers to the primary and secondary causes of attaining higher rebirths and the highest good, and which is virtuous at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. I will explain this **so that you may give rise to** or cultivate **the resultant dharma**—higher rebirths, liberation and enlightenment—**within yourself**. The reason for my explanations is that you are a suitable **vessel of the sacred dharma** and **the dharma will be accomplished in one who is** such a vessel.

THE ACTUAL TEXT

OVERVIEW OF THE CAUSES AND RESULTS WITH REGARD TO HIGHER REBIRTHS AND THE HIGHEST GOOD

Nagarjuna now embarks on a detailed explanation of the subject matter, beginning with an overview that identifies higher rebirths and the highest good as the results

to which we aspire by practicing the dharma, followed by a brief outline of the primary and secondary causes that lead to each result.

Verse three teaches the sequence in which higher rebirths and the highest good are taught.

THE SEQUENCE OF PRESENTING HIGHER REBIRTHS AND THE HIGHEST GOOD

3.

དང་པོར་མངོན་པར་མཐོ་བའི་ཆོས། །

ཕྱིས་ནི་ངེས་པར་ལེགས་འབྱུང་བའོ། །

གང་ཕྱིར་མངོན་པར་མཐོ་ཐོབ་ནས། །

རིམ་གྱིས་ངེས་པར་ལེགས་པ་འོང་། །

First is the dharma of higher rebirths;

Later comes the highest good,

For it is after obtaining higher rebirths,

That one proceeds gradually to the highest good.

In general, the sequence in which the different Buddhist concepts, practices, or teachings are presented in the scriptures is carefully structured, and typically determined by one of two key factors: (1) the order of their arising or (2) the order of their cognition.

The **order of their arising** (ontological sequence) refers to the sequence in which phenomena come into existence, either naturally or through the structured practice of the dharma. An example of a natural progression is the sequence of the twelve links of dependent arising, where the root misperception or ignorance gives rise to compositional actions, which, in turn, give rise to consciousness, and so on.

An example of the sequence through the practice of the dharma is the progression from great compassion to bodhicitta, where the cultivation of great compassion precedes the development of bodhicitta, as it is not possible to cultivate bodhicitta without first generating great compassion.

The **order of their cognition** (epistemological sequence) involves the pedagogical approach of presenting Buddhist concepts, practices, etc. in a way that corresponds to the practitioners' ability to realize and internalize them. This sequence generally prioritizes simpler, more accessible teachings, laying the groundwork that will help practitioners grasp more complex and subtle concepts. For instance, practitioners are usually encouraged to study and reflect on subtle impermanence before delving into the more advanced teachings on emptiness, as it is easier to realize subtle impermanence than emptiness.

Similarly, the sequence in which the four noble truths are taught is based on an understanding of the truth of suffering preceding the understanding of the truth of origin, and an understanding of the truth of cessation preceding the understanding of the truth of the path. This is done despite the fact that the elements of these two pairs arise in reverse order⁴.

By considering the **order of arising** or the **order of cognition**, Buddhist texts ensure that the teachings are either logically consistent with the nature of reality or tailored to the practical needs and capabilities of the practitioners. This methodical arrangement allows for a systematic and effective transmission of Buddhist wisdom, facilitating a deeper understanding and insight into the dharma.

The sequence of arising of higher rebirths and the highest good

In the context of the *Precious Garland*, the sequence in which higher rebirths are presented before the highest good is based on the **order of their arising**. This is primarily due to two reasons:

1. Higher rebirths serve as a conducive *existential foundation* for the attainment of liberation and buddhahood
2. Practicing the causes of higher rebirths creates a conducive *mental foundation* for effectively practicing the causes of liberation and enlightenment

⁴ The truth of origin (afflictions and karma) is the cause of the truth of suffering (the three types of suffering, etc.) and thus precedes it, while the truth of cessation (the cessation of afflictions along with their seeds) can only be attained after the truth of the path (the noble eightfold path) has been cultivated.

1. Higher rebirths serve as a conducive *existential foundation* for attaining liberation and enlightenment

It is not possible to attain the highest good without first experiencing a series of higher rebirths. Those higher rebirths are not an end in themselves: they are essential stepping stones on the path to liberation and enlightenment. This is primarily because conditions in higher realms are uniquely conducive to cultivating the antidotes to afflictive and cognitive obstructions.

In the human and celestial realms there is access to dharma teachers, teachings, and spiritual communities, all of which are invaluable for study, reflection, and meditation; the purification of negative karmic imprints; and the accumulation of merit. Beings in these realms possess the intellectual capacity to understand complex teachings and are not burdened by the extreme suffering found in the lower realms, allowing for greater focus on spiritual pursuits. All these factors render higher rebirths indispensable for anyone seeking liberation and enlightenment, thereby making the creation of the causes to be reborn there an immediate concern.

2. Practicing the causes of higher rebirths creates a conducive *mental foundation* for practicing the causes of liberation and enlightenment

The second reason relates to the sequence of higher rebirth and the highest good from the perspective of the order in which their respective causes arise. This refers essentially to the sequence in which these causes should be practiced. Training in the causes of higher rebirth, such as ethical discipline, must precede the cultivation of the causes of the highest good, such as renunciation and the realization of emptiness. This is because ethical discipline, which involves cultivating virtuous actions and avoiding harmful ones, is generally easier and more accessible than the profound practices that lead to liberation and enlightenment.

Furthermore, the practice of ethical discipline creates a solid mental foundation for the subsequent pursuit of the highest good. By refining our actions of body, speech, and mind through refraining from harmful actions and engaging in beneficial ones, not only do we accumulate virtuous karmic actions, which propel us towards favorable rebirths, we also develop mental states conducive to deeper contemplative practices.

Enhancing our physical, verbal, and mental conduct through ethical discipline purifies negative karma and prepares our mind for the attainment of profound insights into the nature of reality, and in particular into the ultimate nature of reality or emptiness.

If, on the other hand, the concept of emptiness is introduced to us when we are not ready, that is, when our mind is strongly controlled by afflictions such as wrong views, greed, hatred, etc. and their resulting negative actions, we won't be able to comprehend the meaning of the ultimate nature of reality. We might for instance equate emptiness with total nonexistence, causing us to dismiss the law of cause and effect. Acting as we please, as though our actions had no consequences results in destructive karmic actions that will deprive us of any mental freedom by producing unwanted experiences, rebirth in lower realms, and so forth, and will further obstruct our mind and prevent it from understanding how phenomena really exist.

We cannot advance towards liberation and enlightenment by disregarding karma and its outcomes. It is therefore crucial to observe karmic actions and their effects in a way that does not distort our understanding of emptiness.

Likewise, our meditation on emptiness should be done in a way that does not contradict the concept of karma and the experiences to which it gives rise. When both the lack of inherent existence and the law of karma make sense to us, we will see that they do not contradict but complement each other. In this way we will progress on the path to the highest good.

The sequence of cognition of higher rebirths and the highest good

When it comes to realizing higher rebirths and the highest good through reliable cognitive processes, the order of the two is reversed, as understanding higher rebirths is more challenging than comprehending the highest good. This difficulty stems primarily from the fact that the cognition of higher rebirths requires understanding the law of karma and its effects, while the cognition of the highest good involves realizing emptiness. Of these two, the law of karma and its effects is more difficult to ascertain than emptiness, as emptiness is only slightly obscure, whereas the law of karma and its effects is very obscure.

It is important to note that, according to Buddhist epistemology, phenomena are classified into three categories based on their degree of obscurity or difficulty in being understood. In our practice, our understanding of reality progresses through these categories, starting with those that are immediately evident and advancing to those that require deeper levels of insight and realization.

The three categories are:

1. Evident phenomena
2. Slightly obscure phenomena
3. Very obscure phenomena

Evident phenomena refer to aspects of reality that are directly perceivable by our sense consciousnesses or are commonly understood by the mental consciousness with no need for deeper analysis. Examples include everyday sense objects, such as a table and the sound of rain. Other examples are our own personal gross experiences and gross mental afflictions, such as anger, which are evident to our mind, while those of others remain obscure.

Slightly obscure phenomena are somewhat subtle phenomena that are not perceivable by our sense consciousnesses or commonly understood by our ordinary mental consciousness but can be inferred and realized through logical analysis and reasoning in dependence on evident phenomena. Examples are subtle impermanence, emptiness, and dependent arising.

Very obscure phenomena are the most subtle and profound aspects of reality that are beyond the reach of both sense perception and inferential cognition which are based on evident phenomena. Instead, they require reliance on authoritative scriptural passages by the Buddha or other realized masters, which, in turn, requires the cognition that these scriptural passages are reliable and can be accepted as authoritative. Examples are the workings of karma and the enlightened qualities of a buddha.

In brief, the highest good is explained before higher rebirths in terms of their order of cognition, as it is easier to understand liberation and buddhahood than rebirths in the human or celestial realms. This is because the realization of emptiness,

required for understanding the highest good, is easier than comprehending the law of karma and its effects, which is necessary for understanding higher rebirths.

This contrast in ease of comprehension leads us to the following key points:

- I. The cognition of the highest good must be preceded by the realization of emptiness.
- II. The cognition of higher rebirths must be preceded by the realization of the law of karma and its effects.

The cognition of the highest good must be preceded by the realization of emptiness

The fact that the understanding of the highest good is preceded by the realization of emptiness needs to be explained in terms of the two kinds of the highest good: liberation and enlightenment.

Liberation is the cessation of all afflictions, achievable only through the elimination of the root affliction: the mental consciousness that grasps at the inherent or objective existence of phenomena. The eradication of this root misconception entails the automatic elimination of all other afflictions, as they stem from this fundamental misperception and cannot arise once it and its seeds are removed from our mental continuum.

The cessation of afflictions, in turn, halts the creation of contaminated karmic actions, thereby ending the various types of suffering caused by karma.

To fully comprehend liberation, we must understand the cessation of this root misconception, which requires realizing that it is a wrong consciousness—a mind that is not grounded in reality but rather stands in exact opposition to it, perceiving phenomena as inherently existent when they lack such existence.

Realizing that the mind apprehending inherent existence is a wrong consciousness involves recognizing its error regarding its principal object, inherent existence. This cognition requires the realization of emptiness—the lack of inherent existence—for without recognizing that inherent existence is impossible, we cannot discern that the root misperception is mistaken in how it perceives phenomena to exist.

Once we understand that the root affliction is a wrong consciousness, we recognize it can be eliminated. We realize that it can be removed by a mind that, in terms of the object it perceives, stands in direct opposition to it. That mind is the wisdom directly realizing the lack of inherent existence, which, accompanied by profound concentration, is free from any mistaken appearances and aligns with minds that pertain to the method aspect of the path, such as love, compassion, generosity, and so on.